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Goals of the Congress

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GOALS OF THE CONGRESS

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One of the more satisfying experiences in a lifetime of such has been my involvement with the National Rehabilitation Association Task Force on Deafness. Thirty years ago few people in vocational rehabilitation knew or understood about the impact of deafness and, sad to say, it seemed that few cared. The vocational rehabilitation movement was young, vibrant, struggling for recognition, the authorizations, and the funds to mount at least the beginnings of an adequate service structure to restore disabled people to employability. The visible handicaps such as the orthopedics, the amputees, the blind, the cerebral palsied, the limited vitalities were the easily recognizable populations and logically attracted major attention from vocational rehabilitation workers.

These were the days when the giants stepped forward, Mary Switzer, E.B. Whitten, Don Dabelstein, Joe Hunt. The fledging vocational rehabilitation movement thrived to unanticipated extents. The State-Federal grant-in-aid program zoomed from a few million dollars fiscal outlay managed by fewer than 1,500 professionals spread thinly over the country, to the billion dollar service with over 25,000 professionals that we have today. The National Rehabilitation Association, our host and sponsor for this meeting, grew from a thousand or so to the current dynamic 35,000 member organization.

In this process of growth, it may have been inevitable that the vocational rehabilitation needs of deaf people should surface and gain ascendancy. However, it is much more probable that this happy result stemmed from the deep interest and concern of those I have mentioned and others who are still on the firing line providing encouragement and firm support.

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The NRA Task Force on Deafness is one of these manifestations of concern, encouragement and support. Early in its existence the Task Force concluded that we needed to have the input of the consumers of the vocational rehabilitation offering if the administrators of the vocational rehabilitation movement for the deaf were to be reasonably correct in their determination of priorities. Those are the goals of this National Congress on Deafness Rehabilitation, specifically to obtain your views as consumers on what the proper priorities are in the vocational rehabilitation of deaf people.

The planning team for this Congress has selected a unique instrument to focus your thinking on priorities in the vocational rehabilitation of deaf people, the Model State Plan for Vocational Rehabilitation of Deaf Clients. Through your review, reaction and vocalization over the next few days we will reap the most prized of all crops, the organized thinking of those whom we strive to serve.

For clarification and reinforcement, let me quote from the Model Plan itself.

“The effectiveness of a public service relates directly to the responsiveness of its target population. The current superficial nature of VR services to deaf people is a case in point. The deaf population is relatively unsophisticated, uninformed, socio-logically introverted. These circumstances, coupled with the sharp break in normal patterns of communication that isolate deaf people from the mainstream of social intercourse and seriously baffle the usual case worker, produce a social limbo that is unique among humans of normal intelligence.”

In other words, improvement in the delivery of vocational rehabilitation services to deaf clients is in your hands. Speak up and out now, tomorrow, and the next day, and when you return to your communities. Do not be satisfied with the status quo when it is obviously inadequate tokenism. Criticize, demand, consult, implore. Vocational rehabilitation is the great service that it is because its leadership has recognized that a public service thrives on intelligent, constructive criticism. It becomes ineffective, decadent in the face of apathy and indifference.

This Congress will not permit that to happen, I am sure.